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Spiritans in Education: A Long and Varied History

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Most readers of Spiritan are aware of the connection between the Holy Ghost Congregation and education. In Toronto, Neil McNeil, Regina Pacis, Marian Academy, and Libermann Catholic High Schools were all founded by Spiritans. In Edmonton who does not know about Fr. Michael Troy's decades-long involvement with St. Joseph's and most recently with "his own" Father Michael Troy School? Predating any of these schools was Collège Saint-Alexandre in the Gatineau north of Ottawa while in the United States Spiritans founded Duquesne University, Pittsburgh and Holy Ghost Prep, Philadelphia. Readers in Ireland are well aware of Blackrock, St. Michael's, St. Mary's and Templelogue Colleges in Dublin and Rockwell College in Tipperary. By their schools you will know them.

Not only by their schools but by their commitment to education in general. The French government encouraged the early Spiritan missionaries in Africa to gather as much educational material as possible in their mission territories — material in the areas of geography, natural history, anthropology and linguistics. Large tracts of Africa were terra incognita to Europeans when the early missionaries first charted sections of the upper Congo River in fifty-five maps. Other French Spiritans showed great interest in African flora and fauna. Of one such missionary, Fr. Klaine in Gabon, it was written "Between Libreville and the Niger no one ate a cultivated mango, a choice banana, a juicy pineapple or sapodilla which was not the fruit of his unremitting labour." In various botanical research stations, the Spiritans improved local crops and introduced new species of plants.

Farms

In some areas the missionaries established large commercial plantations where horticulture and land management were taught. Not all Spiritans approved of this work — weren't they in Africa to "save souls"? But these plantations gave employment and taught skills to the local people. In addition, the profits from them helped support dioceses, parishes, schools, hospitals, dispensaries and orphanages as well as institutions caring for the poor and the sick in the villages. For several generations most missions were self-sustaining, thanks to their farms.

Spiritan brothers brought coffee to Zanzibar — today it has become East Africa's major export crop. As the missionaries traveled further and further inland to Kilimanjaro, Nairobi and Mombasa, they brought coffee trees with them to support the mission stations. A superior grade of Kenyan coffee is still referred to as missionary coffee.

Linguistics

But above all else, the Spiritans missionaries were interested in the people they had come to evangelize. Nothing reveals the soul of a people better than their language. However despite encouraging learning the local language, the bewildering multitude of dialects and languages in close proximity to one another often discouraged them from doing so. The priests and brothers in education did not succeed nearly as well in becoming fluent in the local tongue as did those who worked in parishes. Starting off with the aid of a catechist-translator, many Spiritan priests became sufficiently fluent to preach and celebrate the sacraments in the local language. Where the local language lacked the necessary technical terms they were not slow to add new words or new meanings to existing words. Of course, today all this is much more advanced — local seminarians, priests and university students discover much better ways to speak the Christian message in their own native language. But when African Spiritans are appointed to other countries in that vast continent, they find their first assignment is to learn a foreign language.

"Educate, educate"

Back in the 1840s Francis Libermann considered education an integral part of missionary work. He emphasized that every mission was to give priority to the schools. So in short order academic subjects were added to the agricultural and vocational curriculum of Spiritan schools. In these local "bush schools", scattered throughout each mission territory, the boys and girls learned religion, reading, writing and arithmetic. The mission paid the meager salaries of the teachers and catechists and the priests regularly visited them as part of their work of preaching the gospel. Although quite rudimentary in design and facilities, these bush schools were very efficient in teaching the local people some basic learning skills and an elementary knowledge of Christianity.

Bit by bit, standard elementary schools followed. They taught the department of education programmes and included the study of the European language of their colonial master, English, French, Dutch, German, or Portuguese. By 1960 it was estimated that the Spiritans operated 7,000 grade schools, staffed by 70,000 teachers and enrolling over 1,000,000 students.

As more and more students graduated from Catholic grade schools, the need for secondary schools and, later, colleges began to grow. This huge system of education required greater and greater numbers of qualified teachers. So most dioceses built at least one teacher training school to staff this ever-growing system.

East Africa today

In January 2007 four members of the Spiritan General Council in Rome visited East Africa. The Spiritans there come from three countries — Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania. Throughout the area the visitors found a thriving interest in the ministry of education. Secondary schools in Tengeru, Kasumo and Bagamoyo, sponsored and managed by the Spiritans, are noted for their programmes of high academic calibre. Marian Girls High School in Bagamoyo, located on the site of the first Catholic parish in East Africa, ranks among the finest in the nation. They also found that technical/professional and specialized schools, such as the Oklokola School for the handicapped, the school for the blind in Kampala and the Maasai Girls School in Arusha make invaluable contributions to the church and people in East Africa.

The first attempt to found a Spiritan university in Africa was made in Pugu, Tanzania in 1950. It was hoped that this top-level college would eventually acquire university status. But in the rapidly changing situation of the 1960s this attempt had to be abandoned. Today, however, Spiritan professors, many of them graduates of the mission school system, lecture in universities in Africa, Europe and North America.

Religious values

In terms of religious well-being, many missions owe their flourishing condition to the care they have lavished on their educational programs. In Southern Nigeria, for instance, Bishop Shanahan's development of an extensive school system literally changed the face of Igbo society. The Spiritan missionaries realized that, to quote a bulletin sent to Rome, "to neglect education would have meant to lose all our Catholic influence and this within a few years."

Social change came to society in the last few centuries under the banner "Agitate, Agitate." The Spiritans brought good news to mission territories under the banner 'Educate, Educate.' ■

The Clementine tree, its creator, and its fruit

According to Spiritan history, Brother Marie-Clément used donated land to develop a species of mandarin that became known as the Clementine in 1894. He wasn't a Spiritan at the time — but more about that later.

Marie-Clément was born Vital Rodier in 1839 in Malveille, France. He wanted to become a Carthusian monk, but found the lifestyle too austere. Instead, he joined the Brothers of the Annunciation at Misserghin near Oran in Algeria where his uncle was a brother and where The Brothers of the Annunciation ran an orphanage. They turned the surrounding land into an agricultural estate with famous nurseries. Here Marie-Clément worked among the vines and citrus trees and trained orphans from France and Algeria.

He introduced several hundred varieties of tree into the country, including fruit and ornamental trees, a marvelous collection of rose bushes with almost six hundred rare varieties. But his claim to fame is his development of a species of mandarin, which was greatly admired by connoisseurs and which the orphans named the Clementine.

One version of how he discovered his fruit says that an uncultivated tree had grown among the thorn bushes on the property, on the back of the Misserghin wadi. It was neither a mandarin tree nor an orange tree. Its fruit was redder than a mandarin, had a delicious taste and no pith. At least that's what a young Arab told Brother Clément after having tasted it. Being very interested in fruits, Brother Clément took it upon himself to make grafts with slips from this peculiar tree. The operation was successful, the grafts increased and the new tree was baptized a Clementine.

A second version of the discovery says that one day Brother Clément was following a bee that was collecting pollen for honey making. The bee flew from a Seville orange tree on to a mandarin tree. Clément was curious. What would come from such cross-fertilization? He attached a red ribbon to the flower of the mandarin tree and kept an eye on the fruit it produced. He then made a seedling from the mature fruit and obtained a Clementine.

How do the Spiritans claim this discoverer as one of their own? Wasn't he a Brother of the Annunciation? The Brothers found themselves in serious economic trouble in 1901. The Vatican authorized them to join the Spiritans — which they did in 1092. So, when he died in 1904 Brother Marie-Clément had been a Spiritan for two years.